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ABSTRACT

A native English-speaker explores the reasons why she persists in speaking her husband's native language, Chinese, at an intermediate level at home, despite the fact that she lives in the United States. She looks, in a humorous way, at the errors she has made in learning Chinese, some cultural contexts for language choice, the importance of cultural transmission to children, the role of the native language for conveying parental authority and filial respect, choice of language as a statement of social power, and the role of languages in the development and maintenance of family relationships. The author then outlines some techniques for encouraging students of a second language to practice that language at home by setting their own, specific parameters for its use. (Contains 16 references.) (MSE)

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Why I Still Speak Chinese At Home

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Abstract

"Why I Still Speak Chinese at Home" was a presentation at the 1999 TESOL Convention in New York City. This paper is an edited version of that speech. The paper examines use of language in the home setting, focusing on why L_1 or L_2 would be the language of choice. A humorous attempt is made to explain why the author uses her husband's first language at home instead of practicing English there. In addition to developing reasons for continued first language use among ENL students, the paper addresses underlying issues of identity, power, and language development. Each language needs to be acknowledged and celebrated, and ways to work toward this goal conclude the paper. A short bibliography related to the topic is attached.

Background and Experience

Why would language students choose to speak L_1 when they are spending time, effort, and money to learn a new language, and when they have been told time and again by their teachers to "speak as much English as possible"? Thinking about this situation led to an examination of my own language practice: Why am I still speaking an intermediate level of L_2 at home, especially since I've been back in the US for many years now?

As a second language learner and teacher, I have had many struggles trying to understand and be understood in Chinese and English, and practicing L_2 has often been difficult, embarrassing, and exasperating. Various examples come to mind, such as asking a Chinese housekeeper "What happened to your sock?" when she had broken her foot. Being asked by a Beijing taxi driver why he could understand everything I said but I couldn't understand anything he said was another humiliating moment. I should have told him that issues of power were at work; his job was dependent on his listening comprehension whereas mine was not; in fact, my not understanding Chinese could bring certain advantages such as translators and more time to compose scholarly answers to students' questions. Less "loss of face," to be exact. My vocabulary was inadequate, however; and I only managed to stutter in L_2. The blend of Mandarin Chinese with American English articulatory settings make my Chinese overly forceful, over-articulated, and pushed too far to the front: a rather ugly, dissonant series of sounds. On one occasion, my tutor remarked, "When you speak Chinese, it sounds not beautiful!" Another

time he exclaimed, "You sound like a man instead of a woman!" (I decided at that point to get rid of my tutor.) Given these examples of my linguistic incompetence, why do I still keep speaking this ill-formed Chinese at home?

I confess that I have tried to be a good language learner. I have tried to defer to cultural norms and expectations. W. S. Lee, in her article, "In the Names of Chinese Women," writes about how babies are named. Deferring to the paternal grandfather, I wrote and asked him to select a suitable name for a girl, because I knew the baby would be a girl. What I didn't know was that this beloved grandfather was also trying to cross that cultural bridge, and so he had selected some English names. We were waiting eagerly for his letter. It seemed a long time coming. When it finally arrived, we opened it nervously. There it was, a baby girl's name: Sarah. We were so excited—what a great name! Then we said it with our last name: Sarah Li. We anxiously wrote the elder Li and told him the bad news. He and his wife wrote back with a new choice: Salome, which only looked like "salami" to us. Salome Li? Fortunately, right after that the baby arrived. It was a boy. What a relief! No pies, cakes, or salami. I called the baby James, the grandfather's English name. This puzzled him, but I told him that it was an American custom...

Reasons for Continued Use of L_1 in the Home

Do you have a favorite story? How well does it translate into your second, third, or fourth language? Try to imagine how the story would sound in L_2, L_3, or L_4. How much of the original texture would it retain? One

Chinese native speaker enjoys telling his two little boys stories about growing up during the Cultural Revolution, including one story about his tree climbing. He had climbed a tree without realizing that it was dead. It fell over, tossing him into the pond below. He screamed for help because he couldn't swim, but others nearby only laughed. Then an elderly woman, wearing a uniform proclaiming her strong support for the Cultural Revolution, fished him out to the jeers of the onlookers. After he went home, he found out from his Grandma that the pond was very shallow, too shallow to drown in. When he tried to go back outside, he discovered that he had no dry clothes to put on, so he borrowed his Grandma's pants and shoes and ran back out to play. Everyone laughed at the flapping shoes and pants, and he raced back inside again!

As the father told this story, his children laughed and laughed at the ridiculous events. His audience has asked him to repeat this story on more than one occasion.

Suppose the speaker had been made to feel guilty for speaking L_1 at home. Would he have attempted to translate the story into his low intermediate English? If so, what would have happened to the story? Or, if the speaker lacked the courage to make the attempt to translate, would he have been silenced? What would have become of the story? Would it have been lost to his children? A major reason for using L_1 at home is to transmit the family's heritage to the next generation. The stories, clichés, idioms, and warnings are language specific. Language is a significant part of culture.

Using L_1 with the children may help the parent set a tone of authority, because he knows that he will not be making syntactic or semantic errors in front of them. If the children are laughing at the parent, it will not be because of a language faux pas. Thus he is able to sort out real disrespect or disobedience from responses to truly comical misstatements. Staying with L_1 eliminates ambiguity.

Some Chinese students invite their parents over for an extended stay. Grandparents bring in a new set of relationships to maneuver. The grandparents may feel disrespected by the student's insistence on using L_2 in front of them when they do not understand it. Sensing this possible disharmony, many students choose to speak L_1 rather than risk offending their parents. My husband's parents, for example, preferred the lexical and structural errors of my fractured Chinese to the apprehension that they experienced while attempting communication in English.

Issues of power arise in language choice. The ability of the speaker to choose the language spoken in a conversation or dialogue represents that person's control of the communication. When the speaker is able to choose the language, she effectively controls the situation. (See for example, McKay and Wong, 1996; Ullman, 1997). Closely related are class issues. "Even the janitor laughs at my English," complained one student. Would he have complained if the dean had laughed at his English? Perhaps the student might have laughed along with the dean or agreed with her about his lack of fluency in English. Remarks such as "Even the paperboy laughs at me."

reveal class differences as well as point to another reason why some ENL speakers revive L_1 in everyday speech: They understand the stigma that society places upon their particular dialect of English and cannot bear the scorn from a person they perceive as from the lower classes.

An additional reason for choosing L_1 in the home is based upon the relationships there. Specific languages are used to form relationships, and the history of a relationship is written in a particular language. The language of love (or anger, for that matter) is spoken in the home. Couples develop their own certain terms of affection and special sayings. Students have reported that switching to another language with their spouse feels odd, "like someone else's relationship." The spouse's ability in English is another factor to be considered in language choice in the home. Attempts to communicate in L_2 can be undermined by the reality of living with someone whose level is either very advanced or far behind the student's level. "My wife knows no English. So when you tell me to practice at home, I have no one to practice with," grumbled one student. The spouse whose level is the lowest may prefer L_1 for face-saving reasons: He or she enjoys sounding sophisticated with loved ones and hates speaking slow, ill-formed phrases in accented L_2.

During the low periods of culture shock, it is tempting to believe the myth that the foreign culture can be kept at the gate by reverting to L_1 in the home. When the student's children begin to adopt foreign customs that conflict with the family's value system, a return to L_1 may provide a false sense of security for the family. L_1 also serves as a reminder of ties to the

native country, and these memories can be comforting during times of stress in the new culture.

Certainly, switching to L_1 reduces the brain's processing load and allows time to relax. Why else would so many foreign language students read and reread old novels in their native language instead of practicing L_2?

Suppose the teacher lived there full-time? Would the situation resolve itself? Issues of power would arise here as well. Codeswitching would occur by context and place. Loss of face, the value of silence, non-verbal signs, cultural expectations, interpretation of cues and communicative strategies, direct vs. indirect styles of speaking and stating preferences, and issues of gender and gender roles are some of the specific areas where possible miscommunication could occur.

The compatibility hypothesis (see US Dept. of Ed.) predicts school success for Chinese children, because their teaching-learning modes match with US education practices. This may also be true of Chinese adults at school (see Clara C. Park). Based upon the reflections offered above explaining continuing L_1 use in the home, the suggestion is made here that the typical home practices of some Chinese adults do not fit well with learning a new language. As each person's home situation varies widely, these observations should not be specifically applied to individuals. Rather, they are offered with the hope that ENL teachers will have greater insight into why students may continue to use L_1 in the home, and that teachers will perceive that the need

for meaningful communication and affirmation may at times outweigh particular course requirements for using L_2 in the home.

Encouraging L_2 Practice in the Home

The promotion of L_2 practice in the home must begin with a respect for L_1 and the recognition of its importance in the student's life. Encouraging L_2 use in the home can be as simple as creating opportunities in the classroom for students to develop homework assignments. In addition to taking responsibility for their own learning, these discussions will remind students of reasons why they are learning L_2. Discussing the most efficient pathways to reach those goals will also reveal students' knowledge of metacognitive strategies.

Example 1: Students brainstorm about ways to practice English outside of class. They may set specific times to use English at home. "I'll practice from 7 to 8 p.m. every night." Will students turn off the t.v.? Or is listening to the t.v. a useful strategy? Will the practice include reading aloud from a book? If the student is the most advanced English speaker in the family, will the English time be worthwhile? Students report on and discuss both successful and unsuccessful attempts to use English in the specified period. Keeping a learning log or journal about these experiences will enliven student discussion and serve as a springboard for the creation of future assignments that help students attain more native-like fluency.

Example 2: Students choose to research the quality of a product they plan to purchase. They use the telephone or make visits to various stores to compare prices and workmanship of the product. Example: car, pizza, home, bicycle, long distance telephone service. Students present their results in class.

Example 3: Students plan and role-play an upcoming interview with a monolingual person. Example: an elementary teacher, an immigration officer, a personnel director, a judge, a lawyer.

Must students feel guilty for L_1 use at home? Or is it possible to encourage students to use both and to develop as true bilinguals?

A Short Bibliography Related to this Topic

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